

Bright for Birmingham?

**A Reassessment of the Popularity of John Bright
as M.P. for Birmingham, 1857-1889**

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Abstract



A VERY GREASY POLE.

John Bright was an MP for Birmingham from August 1857 until his death in March 1889. Posterity has credited him with being an overwhelmingly popular man of the people, a champion of reform and an honest and principled politician. Much has been written about him but, until now, the specific issue of his popularity has been curiously neglected. This study seeks to reflect on the commonly accepted portrayal of Bright's popularity and question the extent to which it represents the reality. It will consider Bright as a parliamentary candidate for Birmingham, as an MP for the town, and as the guest of honour at the celebration of his silver jubilee. In each case, it will reflect on the currently accepted interpretation of him as an immensely popular figure and, through the examination of a wide range of evidence, reassess this accordingly.

Illustration: The Rt. Hon. John Bright M.P., cartoons from the collection of "Mr. Punch", 1878

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Introduction

In the age of the penny post, cheap newspapers and steadily increasing political awareness, the politicians of nineteenth-century Britain were the celebrities of their day. Their attitudes, words, deeds, successes and failures were widely reported to eager audiences across the country. Almost everyone had their heroes and villains, and in Birmingham no one appears to have been more revered than John Bright: MP for the town from 1857 until his death in 1889; honest, forthright, and principled; a leading protagonist of reform; and, above all, a man of unsurpassed popularity amongst the people. Or so it would seem if the plethora of biographies of Bright, stretching back well over a century and virtually unanimous in their praise, are to be believed.

It is particularly noticeable therefore that Patrick Joyce, writing most recently in any significant depth about Bright, stands apart from his contemporaries in his suggestion that this image of 'Bright the popular' may be somewhat exaggerated. 'Bright is history's Bright', he states, arguing that the reality of his popularity has become obscured by those who seek to idolise him.¹ He maintains that Bright's posthumous reputation owes more to carefully managed spin and hero-worship than to reality and, in so doing, casts doubt on the phenomenal popularity of Bright as portrayed by his earlier biographers. And on closer inspection of the majority of Joyce's predecessors, it is not easy to disagree.

¹ Joyce, P. *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth Century England* (Cambridge, 1994), p.88

Certainly, the earlier biographers of Bright can easily be criticised for their hagiographic approach. William Robertson, in particular, is effusive in his descriptions of Bright, frequently referring to him in an overtly familiar and reverential manner. 'He honoured candour, detested false pretence, spurned the sordid and the low, was dauntless in mingling with the strife of minds', he writes of the young Bright, saying of his physical appearance that he 'looked like one resolved to tread a righteous path'.² More importantly, whilst he does tell Bright's story in far more detail than any subsequent biographer, he is noticeably as enthusiastic to include material portraying Bright positively as he is reluctant to do the opposite. In relating the results of the 1859 parliamentary election in Birmingham, for example, he is keen to identify Bright as the 'obvious' choice from the very start, yet neglects to mention the intimidation suffered by his opponent Thomas Dyke Acland at the hands of Bright's supporters, or to reflect on what this implies with regard to Bright's supposed overwhelming popularity.³

Similarly, George Trevelyan, widely regarded as Bright's official biographer, is no less zealous in his praise, frequently referring to Bright on an almost intimate level, describing him, for example, as possessed of a 'deep and tender humanity' and as 'a compassionate lover of his kind'.⁴ The extent of his veneration is further illustrated by his occasional semi-biblical portrayal of Bright, such as his description of Bright's decision to place personal principle ahead of working towards a cabinet position in 1858, stating that 'he preferred to remain in the wilderness until he could lead the whole people into the promised land'.⁵ Of greater concern, however, are his occasionally exaggerated or dubious claims of Bright's achievements, such as his statement that Bright 'won the working class vote by long years of single-handed

² Robertson, W. *The Life and Times of the Right Hon. John Bright* (London, 1883), p.51

³ *Ibid.*, p.367

⁴ Trevelyan, G.M. *The Life of John Bright* (London, 1914), p.2

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.268

agitation'.⁶ Equally questionable are Trevelyan's omissions of details that would cast doubt on his portrayal of Bright's overwhelming popularity, such as his failure to mention the opposition from within Bright's own party to his election in Birmingham in August 1857.

Others biographers such as such as C.A. Vince and Margaret Hirst are similarly forthright in their claims of Bright's popularity, yet offer disappointingly little to support them.⁷ Even the more recent works, whilst arguably more objective in their acknowledgement of some of Bright's deficiencies and generally less effusive overall, still fail to question the apparent popularity of a man who spent so little time in his own constituency. Herman Ausubel is particularly frustrating, proposing that Bright was not as popular as he is commonly portrayed to be and that he 'repeatedly made the devastating discovery that he spoke only for himself, some relatives and friends, and a tiny and insignificant section of the British public', yet subsequently failing to follow up this line of argument in any significant detail and instead falling largely into line with his predecessors.⁸ Equally, in Bright's most recent biography, Keith Robbins does not challenge the conventional view and seems content to follow in the well trodden footsteps of all those who have gone before him.⁹

It would seem then that whilst much has been written about John Bright, little of it can be considered to be truly objective. Certainly, Joyce's notion of the influence of the 'myth of Bright' on the objectivity of his biographers seems feasible enough to suggest the need for further study. Consequently, the subject of Bright's actual popularity, curiously neglected thus far, now demands a more careful examination.

⁶ Ibid., p.3

⁷ Vince, C.A. *John Bright* (London, 1898); Hirst, M. *John Bright, A Study* (London, 1945)

⁸ Ausubel, H. *John Bright, Victorian Reformer* (London, 1966), p.vii

⁹ Robbins, K. *John Bright* (London, 1979)

In the first chapter of this study, this popularity will be examined through the consideration of just how 'uncontested' Bright's initial election and subsequent re-election for Birmingham were in 1857 and 1859 respectively. The term 'uncontested' is used frequently by his biographers and only Robertson offers details of his opposition. This opposition is almost completely ignored by subsequent writers, but nevertheless indicates that his initial popularity in Birmingham was not all-encompassing and so bears further consideration.

This study will subsequently take a longer-term view and, through the medium of the illustrated press, principally the traditionally Liberal *The Dart*, the second chapter will consider how Bright was publicly regarded in his role as an MP for Birmingham. It will focus specifically on the last two decades of his life, a period in which Bright's popularity, in contrast to the preceding decade, traditionally receives scant attention.

Finally, the third chapter will examine the 1883 anniversary celebrations of John Bright held in Birmingham as a case study of his perceived popularity. It will consider the extent to which the event was a genuine reflection of the esteem in which Bright's was held by the town's population, as opposed to an orchestrated publicity stunt and an early use of the 'myth of Bright' by his political contemporaries.

1: The Popular Choice?

John Bright's biographers make much of the fact that, when elected as MP for Birmingham in August 1857, he was 'unopposed'¹, 'returned without opposition'² and 'elected without a contest'.³ Similarly, his subsequent re-election of 1859, if it is mentioned at all, is portrayed as a foregone conclusion in which his overwhelming popularity determined that he had 'no difficulty winning in Birmingham'.⁴ Crucially, however, there *are* suggestions of opposition to Bright, most notably by Robertson, and what is particularly interesting is their brevity and the extent to which these remain largely unexplored and increasingly ignored by successive writers.⁵ The existence of such opposition, despite its neglect, implies that Bright's commonly held popularity may in reality have been less significant than has previously been suggested, and so this possibility clearly bears further investigation. We must consider exactly how 'uncontested' Bright's elections were and the extent to which he truly had 'no difficulty winning'. What does this suggest about the political situation in Birmingham at the time and what is commonly held about the popularity of Bright? In response, this chapter will consider both the initial 1857 by-election whereby Bright was invited to stand for Birmingham, and his subsequent re-election in 1859. In each case it will reflect on the common portrayal of Bright's overwhelming popularity in Birmingham, and contrast this with what is known of his existing opposition to re-define the true extent of his actual popularity during his first few years as one of the town's MPs.

¹ Trevelyan, *John Bright*, p.262; Hirst, *John Bright*, p.71

² Vince, *John Bright*, p.76

³ Ausubel, *Victorian Reformer*, p.87

⁴ Robbins, *John Bright*, p.145

⁵ Robertson, *Life and Times*, pp.345-7

In 1857, following the death of George Muntz, one of two Liberal MPs for Birmingham, John Bright was invited by members of that same party to put himself forward as a candidate. He agreed to do so, and as his two challengers, Forster Alleyne McGeachey and Baron Dickenson Webster, both withdrew before the actual election, his biographers are technically correct in their claims that his election was unopposed.⁶ However, the lack of an opponent does not necessarily imply the lack of opposition and, whilst factually accurate, the biographers in their neglect of such details are serving to foster the mistaken belief that there was no significant objection to John Bright and that his popularity was almost universal. This is an assumption which Patrick Joyce claims has done much to distort our understanding of the true nature of Bright's popularity.⁷ Indeed Robertson, Bright's earliest biographer, is the only writer to mention such opposition in any detail, and even then only as a recount, failing to reflect in any depth on what this implies with regard to Bright's *actual* popularity in Birmingham at this time.⁸ That subsequent biographers are increasingly vague and even arguably dismissive would seem to lend further credence to this hypothesis.⁹ If Joyce is right, then this has dangerous implications for the historian: such supposition, presented as fact and embedded over time, renders any conclusions drawn as highly speculative. It is therefore essential that we understand the *actual* popularity of Bright if we are to draw meaningful conclusions about the relationships between the man and the politics of the period in Birmingham.

It must be remembered that Bright was considered by many of his contemporaries as being 'at no time a party man'¹⁰. Indeed, by his own admission, he was keen to be seen as his own man, unwilling to sacrifice personal principle for political expediency,

⁶ Trevelyan, *John Bright*, p.262

⁷ Joyce, *Democratic Subjects*, p.88

⁸ Robertson, *Life and Times*, p.344-6

⁹ Trevelyan fails to mention any intra-party opposition to Bright whatsoever, as do Hirst, Vince, Ausubel and Robbins.

¹⁰ Mills, J.T. *John Bright and the Quakers: Volume 2* (London, 1935), p.291

stating that 'I do not trouble myself whether my conduct in parliament is popular or not. I care only that it shall be wise and just as regards the permanent interests of my country'.¹¹ He stood neither in one camp, nor in the other: the semi-radical views that antagonised the Conservatives also ruffled the same feathers of a number of more moderate Liberals.¹² Yet at the same time D.P. Leighton suggests that he was not so radical as he was portrayed and 'not so widely loved by local radicals' as has been suggested.¹³ Certainly his principles of anti-European and anti-Indian intervention, when most radicals were strongly in favour of such, were not popular with them.¹⁴ Similarly, his anti-monarchist, anti-aristocratic outbursts were no less antagonistic to the ruling elite. His Quakerism and objections to an Anglican religious monopoly did not endear him to the established church.¹⁵ Equally, his stance against legislation to restrict factory working hours and his opposition to trade unions was not welcomed by the working class.¹⁶ As a result, Ausubel's description of him as a man 'guaranteed to win... the hatred of the people who mattered in Victorian society' becomes more readily understandable.¹⁷ Thus in any party, including his own, there were undoubtedly those to whom at least some of his principles were undesirable. Even at this most simplistic level, therefore, it is difficult to see how he could be as immensely popular as he has been portrayed, and even more difficult to believe that he did not face opposition of any significance.

That the Conservatives put up McGeachey to stand against Bright in 1857 is hardly surprising. Bright's opinions on matters of reform were no secret and had not made him popular with the traditional aristocracy, monarchists and landed interests that

¹¹ Rogers, J.E.T. (ed.) *Speeches by John Bright M.P. Vol. I*, 2nd Ed. (London, 1869), p.469

¹² *Birmingham Gazette*, 17 August 1857, p.4

¹³ Leighton, D.P. 'Municipal Progress, Democracy and Radical Identity in Birmingham, 1838-1886', *Midland History*, 25 (2000) pp.115-142, p.120

¹⁴ Ward, R. *City-State and Nation* (Chichester, 2005), p.54

¹⁵ Hirst, *John Bright*, p.111

¹⁶ Ward, *City-State*, p.54

¹⁷ Ausubel, *Victorian Reformer*, p.viii

formed the heart of the Conservative electorate. His middle-class background, anti-war stance and earlier work against landed interests with Richard Cobden and the Anti-Corn Law League only served to reaffirm this.¹⁸ Indeed, he was an object of much disdain amongst Tory protectionists in the 1850s. Conservative objection, therefore, was virtually inevitable. McGeachey, however, proved far less popular than Bright and was not considered likely to prove a significant challenge.¹⁹ What is more interesting is the opposition to Bright's election which came from less expected quarters. Notably, Bright was *not* the popular choice for a number of those within his own party in Birmingham, yet this is rarely mentioned in most of the writings concerning Bright and this in itself is perhaps indicative of the impact of Joyce's proclaimed 'myth of Bright' on the subsequent portrayal of events.

Perhaps the most common concern amongst the more moderate Birmingham Liberals was Bright's pro-peace stance, particularly as he was intending to represent a city with its own gun quarter and a clear economic dependency on armed conflict overseas. His earlier and much-publicised anti-interventionist opinions regarding the Crimean war had left a sour taste in the mouth of a number of radicals who preferred the overseas politics of Palmerston.²⁰ Indeed, on 1 August 1857, at a Liberal meeting convened in Birmingham to consider Muntz's successor, Councillor Joseph Stinton opposed Bright's candidature due to his strong views on peace, believing them to be incompatible with current or future foreign policy.²¹ This was not an isolated objection and at the reconvened meeting later that evening, Mr. Dalziel, a non-elect, similarly objected to the pacifistic Bright representing a city whose trading interest depended

¹⁸ Hirst, *John Bright*, pp.23, 28

¹⁹ Langford, J.A. *Modern Birmingham and its Institutions: A Chronicle of Local Events, From 1841 to 1871: Vol 2* (Birmingham, 1877), p.10; Leicester Chronicle, 8 August 1857, clearly considered Webster as Bright's main opponent.

²⁰ Ward, R. 'From Manchester to Birmingham: The Political Career of John Bright MP for Birmingham, 1857-1889', *The Birmingham Historian*, 7 (1991) pp.5-10, p.6

²¹ Robertson, *Life and Times*, p.345; *Birmingham Gazette*, 3 August 1857, p.2

on war.²² At the same meeting, Mr. Mytton also objected to Bright on the grounds that a gun city was not a good match for Bright's known principles of peace.²³ Details of such opposition, however, remain conspicuously absent from most of the biographies of Bright.

Another cause of disquiet was that some Liberals believed that their candidate should be a man of significant standing in the *local* community. As a Rochdale man, Bright was most certainly *not* local and nor did he have any intention of becoming so. Indeed, he made no secret of the fact that he intended to continue to reside in Rochdale and, tellingly, from the very outset referred to Birmingham as 'your town', its constituents as 'your townspeople' and its town hall as 'your town hall'.²⁴ This presumably did little to mollify his critics. Notably, at the subsequent public meeting of 4 August in Birmingham, one of the reasons Dalziel gave for proposing George Dawson, the town's leading Nonconformist clergyman, instead of Bright, was the extent of his local experience. However, Dawson, in all likelihood grudgingly, said that he would not stand against Bright and suggested that Bright's political experience made him the far more suitable candidate, even at the expense of his own local knowledge and their disagreement over foreign policy.²⁵ Nevertheless, this is clearly another source of opposition to Bright which has again received scant attention from historians.

A further concern was that Bright's health represented a gamble.²⁶ He had a history of illness, and of taking extended breaks from political life, and at the time of his proposal for Birmingham, he was so sickly that he was unable to attend his own

²² Ibid., p.345; Ibid., p.2

²³ Ibid., p.345; Ibid., p.2

²⁴ Ward, *City-State*, p.55; Langford, *Modern Birmingham*, p.11

²⁵ Robertson, *Life and Times*, p.346; *Birmingham Gazette*, 3 August 1857, p.2

²⁶ Ward, *City-State*, p.54

election. Bright's doctors diagnosed mental exhaustion and anxiety, and recommended long periods spent away from public speaking.²⁷ There was no way to be certain that he would overcome these issues.

The strength of such concerns was clearly reflected in the number of alternative candidates that were proposed by members of the Liberal Committee to stand instead of Bright. In addition to Dawson, Dalziel had previously proposed Joshua Walmsley, a leading middle-class radical of national renown.²⁸ At that same meeting, Hill had disagreed with both Bright and Walmsley and proposed William Matthews instead.²⁹ Feelings were so strong that at the public meeting on Tuesday 4th August, Thomas Attwood, son and namesake of the famous political reformer, proposed Webster and Alderman Lawde supported this over Bright.³⁰ As a result, Bright now officially faced opposition from within the Liberal party, backed by the weight of some very reputable members, as well as from the Conservatives. Bright was most definitely not unanimously popular amongst his fellow Liberals.

Opposition to Bright did not come purely from his political contemporaries however. The Lords Day Defence Association issued a decree that no candidate should be regarded as satisfactory to Christian electors unless they were prepared to oppose all legislation that would lead to the secularisation of that day.³¹ Clearly, given his Quakerism and well-known views with regard to the established church, it is highly unlikely that anyone adhering to this edict would have considered Bright as satisfactory.

²⁷ Walling, R.A.J. (ed.) *The Diaries of John Bright* (London, 1930), pp.203, 205

²⁸ Robertson, *Life and Times*, p.345

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.345

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.346

³¹ Langford, *Modern Birmingham*, p.10

His popularity with the greater public was equally questionable and again, whilst it was significant, it may not have been as overwhelming as we have been led to believe. In particular, his decision not to reside in Birmingham caused consternation and led some to question his commitment and motives.³² Certainly, despite Quinault's claim that he was never regarded as a 'carpet bagger', he did have to face allegations of being such. In one newspaper, he responded to such accusations by strongly refuting that he was using Birmingham as a political stepping-stone or stop-gap, writing that 'it is strange that anyone should imagine I could prefer any other constituency... I know no nobler constituency than that of Birmingham'.³³ Although these words are less than convincing in light of the small amount of time he actually spent in Birmingham, generally amounting to one or two annual visits, commonly of less than a week each. For, although it was not uncommon for MPs to be absent from their constituencies for extended periods, the major towns were increasingly returning locally-based MPs, and local employers in particular.

The public mood then appears to have been one of cautious optimism as opposed to an overwhelming congratulatory stance, and is clearly reflected in the newspapers reporting his election success. *The Annual Register* cited his honesty as the reason for their support.³⁴ *The Economist* also expressed a generally positive opinion but warned of his mistaken and crotchety ideas.³⁵ *The Illustrated London News* was congratulatory, but expressed a hope that he had learned lessons from his poor handling of the Crimean issue during his time in Rochdale.³⁶ More locally, the pro-Conservative *Birmingham Gazette* made much of McGeachey's speeches and meetings but, unsurprisingly, remained uncharacteristically non-committal on Bright's

³² *Ibid.*, p.21

³³ *Ibid.*, p.21

³⁴ *The Annual Register*, 1857, p.151

³⁵ *The Economist*, 22 August 1857, p.924

³⁶ *The Illustrated London News*, 15 August 1857, p.159

victory.³⁷ Only the *Birmingham Journal* was particularly effusive, hailing Bright's election as exactly what the country needed.³⁸ Here, once again, it is clear that Bright's popularity was most certainly not all-encompassing and, despite his ensuing victory, he was not assured of the mass support with which posterity seems to have credited him.

Further lack of enthusiasm for Bright's election to Birmingham came from a far more intimate quarter: that of his family and friends. As a result of his recent illness, they were concerned about the levels of stress that his election to Birmingham would place him under. Notably, Richard Cobden was particularly worried that he was returning too quickly and repeatedly expressed such concerns in his correspondence with Bright.³⁹ Apart from his health, his Quaker family and more significantly that of his wife, were unhappy at the conflict between his faith and his work.⁴⁰ Indeed, he himself found this difficult to manage and there is much suggestion that this was a major contributory factor to his earlier illness.⁴¹ Accordingly, he was initially reluctant to return, suggesting other potential candidates in his stead and only accepting after securing an extended period of convalescence, which he explained in a public letter dated 2 December 1857 to Thomas Lloyd, Alderman of Birmingham Council, and the electors of Birmingham.⁴²

Even the pro-Bright Liberals appear to have had ulterior motives for supporting him. Robbins argues that the Birmingham Liberals who approached Bright were seeking a 'national celebrity' who could bring their local reform politics to the national stage,

³⁷ *Birmingham Gazette*, 17 August 1857, p.4

³⁸ *Birmingham Journal*, 12 August 1857, p.2

³⁹ Ausubel, *Victorian Reformer*, p.88

⁴⁰ Hirst, *John Bright*, p.103

⁴¹ Taylor, M. 'Bright, John (1811-1889) politician', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004) [accessed 14 April 2011:<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3421?docPos=3>], p.9

⁴² Langford, *Modern Birmingham*, p.13

and that they did not expect any more than this.⁴³ Crucially, when an initially reluctant Bright suggested alternative candidates to those who wished him to stand, he was told that the Liberal committee wanted a candidate who was closely associated with parliamentary reform.⁴⁴ This would seem to imply that his reputation was indeed more important to them than he himself was. The fact that those who invited him to Birmingham made their backing conditional upon his declaration of support for the suppression of the India Mutiny, despite his well-known feelings on the subject, merely reinforces the notion that they wanted Bright's reputation but not the man and his principles.⁴⁵ Furthermore, their payment of all his election expenses and, more significantly, their acceptance that he would start late and continue to reside in Rochdale rather than Birmingham is suggestive of the lengths to which they were willing to go to obtain it. It may even be that his limited presence in Birmingham made it easier for them to use his reputation more effectively in his absence. Certainly, Cobden famously stated that Birmingham was a more appropriate base from which to lead the fight for parliamentary reform, due to the presence of a far greater proportion of middle-class employers, large numbers of skilled workers and a more genial relationship between the two groups.⁴⁶ This begs the question of whether the choice of Bright was less significant for the Liberals than was the placing a suitably radical figurehead in the right place at the right time. In light of this, it is difficult to refute at least some of Joyce's arguments and we must ask if these are the early stages of what will evolve to become his 'myth of Bright'. It certainly appears to be the case.

⁴³ Robbins, *John Bright*, p.130

⁴⁴ Taylor, 'Bright, John (1811-1889) politician', p.10; Ausubel, *Victorian Reformer*, p.89

⁴⁵ Trevelyan, *John Bright*, p.261; Walling, *Diaries*, p.231

⁴⁶ Quinault, R. 'John Bright and Joseph Chamberlain', *The Historical Journal*, 28 (1985) pp.623-646, p.626

By 1859 and the general election, political determination had increased accordingly. Liberal Conservatives, perhaps responding to the new impetus that Bright's presence had seemingly given to the Liberals, sought to blur party distinctions to increase their share of the electorate's support and in so doing increased pressure on the Liberals.⁴⁷ This culminated in Bright's seat being contested by two other candidates, only one of which withdrew. Despite this, Bright's biographers maintain that his support was overwhelming and his re-election a foregone conclusion. With the results of the election as 1544 votes for his opponent, 4282 for Bright and 4425 for his colleague Scholefield, they are technically correct.⁴⁸ Yet their poor coverage is once again misleading, obscuring facts and propagating the myth of Bright's overwhelming popularity despite the lack of sufficient supporting evidence.

Indeed, this time it is clear that opposition to Bright was stronger and better organised. A challenge by the Conservative, Dr. George Boddington, was somewhat short-lived and received little support.⁴⁹ However, a coalition of Conservatives, Whigs and moderate Liberals put forward Thomas Dyke Acland to oppose Bright as a Liberal Conservative.⁵⁰ The fact that a credible alternative candidate was found who would 'go the distance' meant that Bright faced a far more significant challenge than he had in the 1857 by-election and this alone suggests that his cross-party popularity had not improved. If anything, the fact that such a coalition was formed to oppose him specifically suggests that it had deteriorated. That Acland, previously a Conservative, had been invited to stand by 'many respectable members of the Liberal party' similarly indicates the strength of feeling against Bright from within his

⁴⁷ Anon. 'Birmingham: Borough Constituency', *The History of Parliament*, (London, Unpublished) [accessed 14 April 2011:<http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1832-1868/constituencies/Birmingham>], p.11

⁴⁸ Trevelyan, *John Bright*, p.280

⁴⁹ Langford, *Modern Birmingham*, p.33

⁵⁰ Anon. 'Birmingham: Borough Constituency', p.11

own party.⁵¹ Indeed, the sons of Liberal stalwarts Thomas Attwood and George Muntz, whose names alone carried much weight, were amongst Acland's supporters.⁵² It is suggested that, much in the way they had two years earlier, Bright's principles continued to alarm local Liberals.⁵³ Given the agreement over the India Mutiny that was made a condition of his nomination at his previous election in 1857, this does not seem too unlikely. Bright's supporters claimed that Acland was a dupe and that those supporting him were 'busybodies who think to fix attention on themselves', more interested in personal gain through bolstering their own reputations than in what was best for the party or for Birmingham.⁵⁴ They also promoted the condemnation of Acland by members of the public who in turns expressed their sorrow at his 'forlorn condition' or their anger at him 'proving himself a fool'.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, this does not disguise the fact that he did find support and, almost two years after his initial election to Birmingham, Bright's popularity clearly continued to be less than overwhelming, both within his own party and beyond it.

What is perhaps more interesting, though, are the tactics employed by the Liberal supporters in the lead-up to the 1859 election. Preferring small-scale canvassing to large town meetings, Acland complained of being regularly interrupted in his work by hecklers who prevented him from speaking.⁵⁶ *The Birmingham Daily Post* describes Acland's meeting of the Deritend and Bordsley ward, for example, as an 'extraordinary scene', and recounts how continued heckling and intimidation from supporters of Bright led to the meeting being ended prematurely, and subsequently hijacked by the antagonists to pass motions in favour of Bright.⁵⁷ Admittedly, the *Post*

⁵¹ *Daily News*, 21 April 1859, p.3

⁵² Anon. 'Birmingham: Borough Constituency', p.11

⁵³ *Birmingham Gazette*, 25 April 1859, p.3

⁵⁴ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 21 April 1859, p.2

⁵⁵ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 22 April 1859, p.2

⁵⁶ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 22, 27, 28 April 1859

⁵⁷ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 22 April 1859, p.4

was a Liberal-run paper and did much to bolster Bright and discourage opposition to him, but this was not an isolated event and many of Acland's meetings met with similar responses.⁵⁸ Even at the nomination, despite speaking for an hour, Liberal heckling from the audience meant that his comments were largely inaudible.⁵⁹ This typifies the aggressive nature of Birmingham politics to minorities of this period that Ward describes as 'harsh [or] even violent'.⁶⁰ Indeed, in reflecting on how Liberal intimidation could have impacted on Acland's success, it is particularly telling that a show of hands at the nomination was estimated at only 150 in favour of Acland, yet the subsequent poll revealed more than ten times that number.⁶¹ Thus, despite the result clearly favouring Bright, the whole conduct of the election must surely cast further doubt on his popularity if it was felt that such intimidating and aggressive tactics were needed to ensure that he was returned to his seat. His supporters may well have been more concerned by his opposition than they would admit.

Even having secured election, it is notable that Bright was not offered a cabinet position due to his outspoken objections to the power of the House of Lords and the influence of the aristocracy on the governing of the country.⁶² The parallels between this decision and that regarding his response to the India Mutiny two years earlier are difficult to ignore: in each case, Bright's reputation appears to have been instrumental in securing victory for the Liberals. Equally, in each case, his supporters have taken steps to 'manage' Bright and discourage him from harming that reputation. This may be an early indication that the usefulness of the man and his principles was already

⁵⁸ *Birmingham Gazette*, 25 April 1859, p.4

⁵⁹ BAH, Birmingham Miscellaneous D/14, Acc.No. 62752 (Speech of Thomas Dyke Acland at the nomination of candidates for the representation of Birmingham, 1859) p.3; Smith, G.B. *John Bright, His Life and Speeches: Vol. II* (London, 1885), p.346

⁶⁰ Ward, *City-State*, p.11

⁶¹ Smith, *His Life and Speeches: Vol. II*, p.346

⁶² Trevelyan, *John Bright*, pp.281-2; Walling, *Diaries*, p.242

beginning to be overtaken by that of the myth. It seems that Bright was becoming a victim of his own success and his popularity was taking on a life of its own.

It is clear, therefore, that John Bright was most definitely *not* without political opponents during his early years in Birmingham and that, despite their failure, he faced significant opposition both from within his own party and beyond. His popularity at this time, certainly amongst his contemporaries, was not as all-encompassing as his biographers suggest, whether explicitly or, more commonly by omission, implicitly, and even his supporters were moved by more than pure admiration for the man. That is not to say that he was unpopular, but rather that he was less popular than he is commonly portrayed as being. In addition, it is particularly concerning that the biographers of Bright are seemingly somewhat unreliable. It certainly seems increasingly likely that Joyce's argument that the 'myth of Bright' has influenced those writing about him has at least some truth to it. However, only Bright's early years in Birmingham have been considered and the conclusions drawn here must therefore be limited to this period. We must now consider how popular Bright was, having taken up his role as MP for Birmingham, and how this compares to the popular image endorsed by his biographers. Did the myth of Bright grow to exceed that of the man himself or, despite these initial inaccuracies, was his reputation as an overwhelmingly popular MP largely deserved?

2: The Popular Representative?

The overwhelming popularity attributed by posterity to John Bright during his early years in Birmingham has been shown to be less than is commonly supposed, but what of his later years? Bright served as MP for Birmingham for over thirty years and we cannot pass judgement on the popularity of the man, based solely on an examination of his earliest years alone. Certainly, his first decade in Birmingham, culminating in the Reform Act of 1867, has been studied in depth, but what of the remaining two decades? Exactly how popular was Bright once he had established himself as MP for the town? This chapter will focus predominantly on the post-1867 period as it has been somewhat neglected and, through the medium of the illustrated press, reflect on how his portrayal possibly contrasts with his biographers' claims.

The greater part of work relating to Bright's time in Birmingham focuses on his first decade as MP for the town, culminating in the passing of the 1867 Reform Act which is commonly portrayed as the pinnacle of his career. Robbins refers to it as 'a time when his standing had never been higher'.¹ Similarly, Vince proclaims it as 'the crowning triumph of Bright's career'.² Trevelyan agrees that 'the life-task of the great agitator had now been fulfilled'.³ In actual fact, the passage of the Act was complex and the work of many, but crucially it was Bright who emerged in the public consciousness as the leading protagonist, perceived as having united both working and middle-class reformers.⁴ As a result, his popularity soared and 'he came to be revered, even in circles where he had fewest friends, as a national institution'.⁵

¹ Robbins, *John Bright*, p.195

² Vince, *John Bright*, p.126

³ Trevelyan, *John Bright*, p.4

⁴ Ward, 'Manchester to Birmingham', p.8

⁵ Trevelyan, *John Bright*, p.387

Considerably less, however, has been written about Bright in the wake of the act, and this reflects the general consensus that his career was in decline.⁶ Robbins suggests that Bright had had enough and felt 'snuffed out' and exhausted.⁷ Notably, even the ever-effusive Trevelyan concedes that he was 'spent' and 'ceased to lead'.⁸ Yet despite this, the biographers of Bright still maintain his enduring popularity. Trevelyan describes him as, 'until the end, the most revered and most generally loved figure in politics'.⁹ Vince similarly writes that even in his later years, 'his reputation always endured a respectful hearing'.¹⁰ Robertson maintains that Bright, at least amongst his peers, was a national and influential politician to the end of his career.¹¹ However, large crowds and the promise of a spectacle do not, as his biographers seem to insist, give sufficient evidence of his popularity. Indeed, the very fact that their claims of his popularity during his earlier years in Birmingham have been shown to be unreliable, merits a scrutiny of their similar claims with regard to his later years.

To this end, we shall look predominantly at *The Dart*, a broadly Liberal periodical of the day, established in 1876 and sold in 1879 to Robert Simpson Kirk who tellingly received some of his funding from local Tories. Although initially intending gentle satire, *The Dart* increasingly became the voice of opposition in Birmingham during the years of Liberal domination and, with a run of 20,000 copies a week, was undoubtedly influential in both shaping and reflecting public opinion. It was particularly critical of the group of MPs forming the Liberal 'Caucus', to which it referred as 'the domination of the malignants in the council' and their supporters as 'blind follower[s] of the caucus clique'.¹² Its attitude was summed up neatly by this

⁶ Ward, 'Manchester to Birmingham', p.8

⁷ Robbins, *John Bright*, pp.195, 212-3

⁸ Trevelyan, *John Bright*, p.414

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.414

¹⁰ Vince, *John Bright*, p.177

¹¹ Robertson, *Life and Times*, p.557

¹² *The Dart*, 10 January 1880, p.9

anonymous poem alluding to the formation of the Caucus by Joseph Chamberlain, and his motives for doing so;

“I’ve got it,” said he with a face full of glee,
“Dame Virtue shall no longer baulk us;”
Then with a jubilant cry, he winked his left eye,
Gave a laugh and invented – the caucus!¹³

Kirk perceived this small group, gathered around Chamberlain, as controlling the town and maintaining power by strong-arm political tactics. They were supported in this by a dominant Liberal local press, including *The Gridiron*, *The Owl* and *The Birmingham Daily Post*. Thus, if we are to find any criticisms of Bright and the Liberals during this period, then it is arguably to *The Dart* that we should look. Of course, *The Dart* will obviously be one-sided but, as the very object of our research is to identify dissent with the general consensus, this serves our purpose perfectly.

It has come to be accepted that Bright’s victory at the 1868 election in Birmingham was the inevitable result of his being credited with the successful passing of the second Reform Act the previous year. Certainly, it cannot be denied that Bright’s popularity was significantly affected by this perception – whether it is accurate or not. Indeed, of the five candidates, only Bright’s election was presumed to be a foregone conclusion.¹⁴ And yet, using the result of the election as evidence of the man’s popularity is somewhat tenuous when the context in which the election occurred is considered. Established in 1865, the Birmingham Liberal Association was an organisation that ‘for the next 20 years... was to dominate Birmingham politics and to become a by-word for effective and ruthless political management’.¹⁵ Its opponents labelled it the ‘Caucus’, a satirical and unfavourable comparison to urban American

¹³ *The Dart*, 24 April 1880, p.13

¹⁴ *The Town Crier*, September 1868, p.11

¹⁵ Ward, *City-State*, p.62

political corruption. Nevertheless, it was undeniably effective, particularly in establishing and managing a system of sixteen wards to direct voting and ensure that Liberal MPs and councillors were safely returned. The skill with which this was managed in 1868 is evidenced by the extremely narrow margins between the results of the three Liberal candidates.¹⁶

However, the tactics employed to achieve this were somewhat questionable. *The Birmingham Gazette*, admittedly a pro-Tory newspaper, described the election as typified by unprecedented violence and coercion where in some wards 'the polling booths were "guarded" by a number of the most desperate looking roughs...all armed with weapons... pretty freely used upon any person who was indiscreet enough to utter an expression favourable to the Liberal Conservative candidates... [and that] it required an elector with no little amount of courage to vote in any other way than that in which he was told'.¹⁷ Even the Liberal-owned *Birmingham Daily Post* printed the letter of a constituent complaining about the inability of the police to deal with the situation.¹⁸ Crucially, it was not the threat of violence that was unusual in an election of this period, however, but the level of organisation. Additionally, Bright's opponents also complained that forged voting cards had been used.¹⁹ With the use of such ruthless tactics, a Liberal victory was virtually a foregone conclusion and thus Bright's success can hardly be considered evidence of his overwhelming popularity. What it does imply, however, is that Patrick Joyce's argument that the *image* of Bright's popularity was the product of careful political management may, at least to an extent, be correct.

¹⁶ Anon. 'Birmingham: Borough Constituency', p.14

¹⁷ *Birmingham Gazette*, 21 November 1868, p.6

¹⁸ *Birmingham Daily Post*, 21 November 1868, p.3

¹⁹ *Birmingham Gazette*, 28 November 1868, p.4

Certainly, this image of Bright's overwhelming popularity was a phenomenon that was to continue throughout the 1870s, despite indications that it was not necessarily accurate. Most notably, Bright's illness returned during the early 1870s and he again retired from public life.²⁰ His return bore witness to the defeat of the Liberals in the 1874 election and was considered untimely by some. *The Birmingham Gazette*, in particular, attacked Bright and suggested that it was his return that may have been the cause of the Liberals' electoral failings. This was an opinion espoused, it wrote, by the *New York Times* which 'advocates the precipitation of Mr. Gladstone's downfall to Mr Bright'.²¹ It suggested that in returning angry, dissatisfied and confused, Bright did much to divide and weaken the party. They were certainly correct in their statement that 'the right hon. gentleman is not at one with colleagues upon certain matters'.²² The *Gazette* also called into question Bright's diminishing ability as an orator, asking of his speeches, 'where are the "musts" and "shalls" which used to characterise the right hon. letter-writer's effusions? Where the imperative word, once so particularly obvious and prevalent?'²³ Certainly it would appear that Bright was perceived by some as being less than he had been, and even his biographers agree.²⁴

Nevertheless, he still appeared to retain his popularity and his seat in Birmingham and would continue to do so until his death at the age of seventy-eight. Indeed, Robbins notes that 'he had no difficulty in Birmingham'.²⁵ Although, as the Caucus was at the peak of its power, to the extent that the Conservatives could find no candidates to stand against Bright and his colleagues in 1874, this is hardly surprising. The extent of his popularity is reflected in the first ever Dart cartoon of him

²⁰ Walling, *Diaries of Bright*, p.342; Vince, *John Bright*, p.4

²¹ *Birmingham Gazette*, 21 February 1874, p.5

²² *Birmingham Gazette*, 28 January 1874, p.4

²³ *Birmingham Gazette*, 25 March 1874, p.4

²⁴ Robbins, *John Bright*, p.216

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.218; Taylor, 'Bright, John (1811-1889) politician', p.14

(fig.1), showing Tory Home Secretary Richard Cross, responsible for the Artisans' Dwelling act of 1875, in the background and clearly 'overshadowed' by John Bright.²⁶

Fig.1



²⁶ *The Dart*, 2 December 1886

It refers to the visit of Cross to Birmingham to bolster Conservative support, and suggests that, even though the Artisans and Dwellings Act must have been popular with the electors of Birmingham, the town having gained the largest scheme under the Act, the subsequent visit of John Bright was seen as much more significant. 'We imagine that any good effect that may have accrued to the party from his visit will be more than counterbalanced by the visit of a "greater than he"', the commentary explains.²⁷ Clearly, this reflects Bright's continuing popularity with the people of Birmingham. The fact that an 'anti-Caucus' periodical would print an image endorsing one of its erstwhile opponents is further evidence of just how powerful and influential this popularity was. The subsequent issue heaped yet more praise on him, writing that '*the* orator of England always commands attention, his utterances always have weight, and the snarls of Tory fry, local or metropolitan, serve but to cover the authors with ridicule'.²⁸

By the time of the 1880 election, it would appear that Bright was still broadly regarded as popular, certainly more so than his opponents. This cartoon from 1879 (fig.2) shows Bright and Fred Burnaby, his Conservative opponent in the forthcoming election, in the guise of musicians.²⁹ By the quality of their clothes, their demeanour and even the size of their instruments, Burnaby is clearly perceived as the 'poor man' in this contest, suggesting he lacked Bright's popularity. It is equally notable that whilst Bright is playing the music of free trade to the audience, Burnaby is failing to respond with his protectionist instrument. This perhaps implies that Bright was a more skilful politician able to perform for his audience whilst Burnaby was not and, perhaps because of this, that his free trade ideology continued to dominate that of

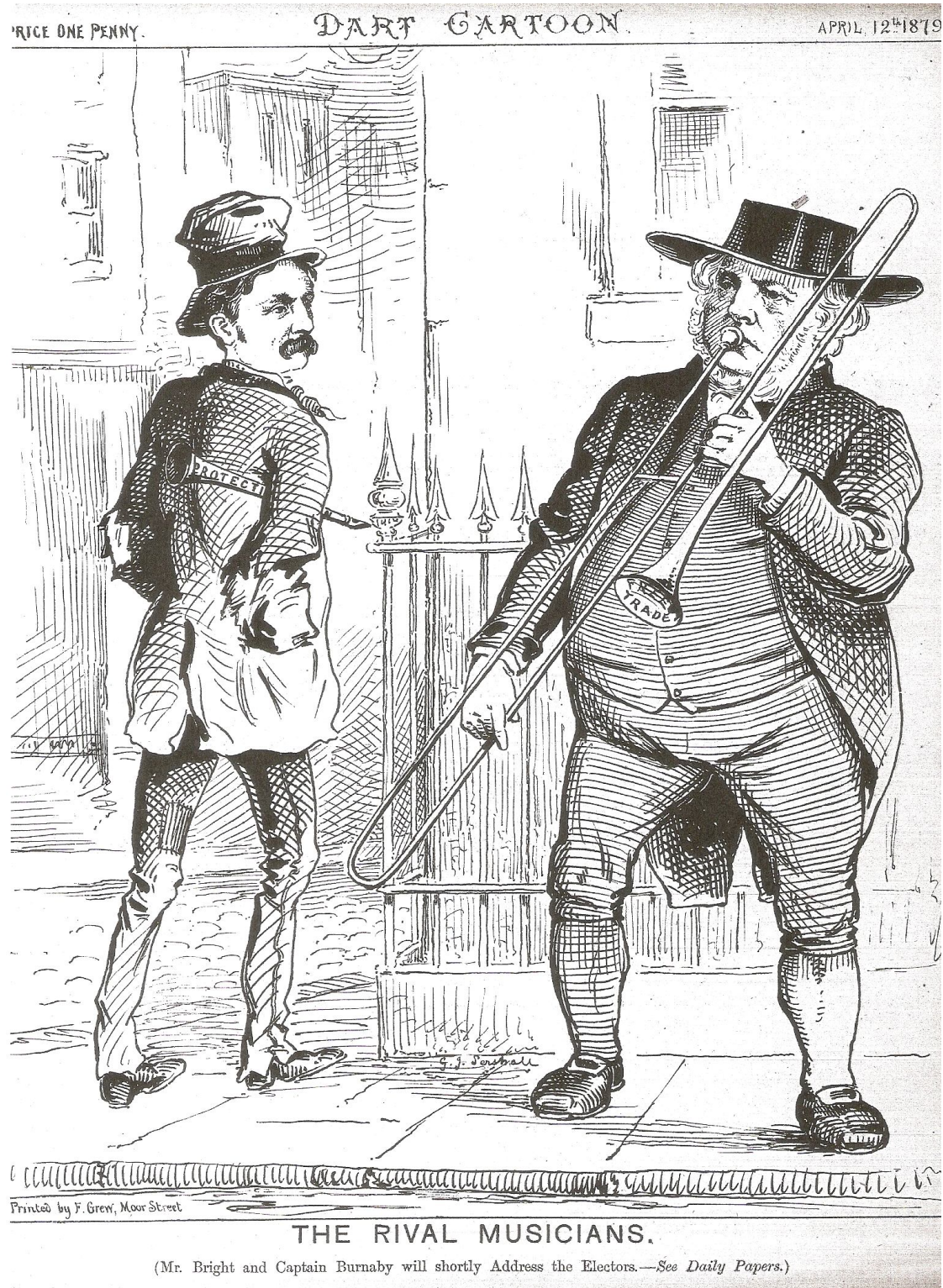
²⁷ *The Dart*, 2 December 1876, p.5

²⁸ *The Dart*, 9 December 1876, p.4

²⁹ *The Dart*, 12 April 1879

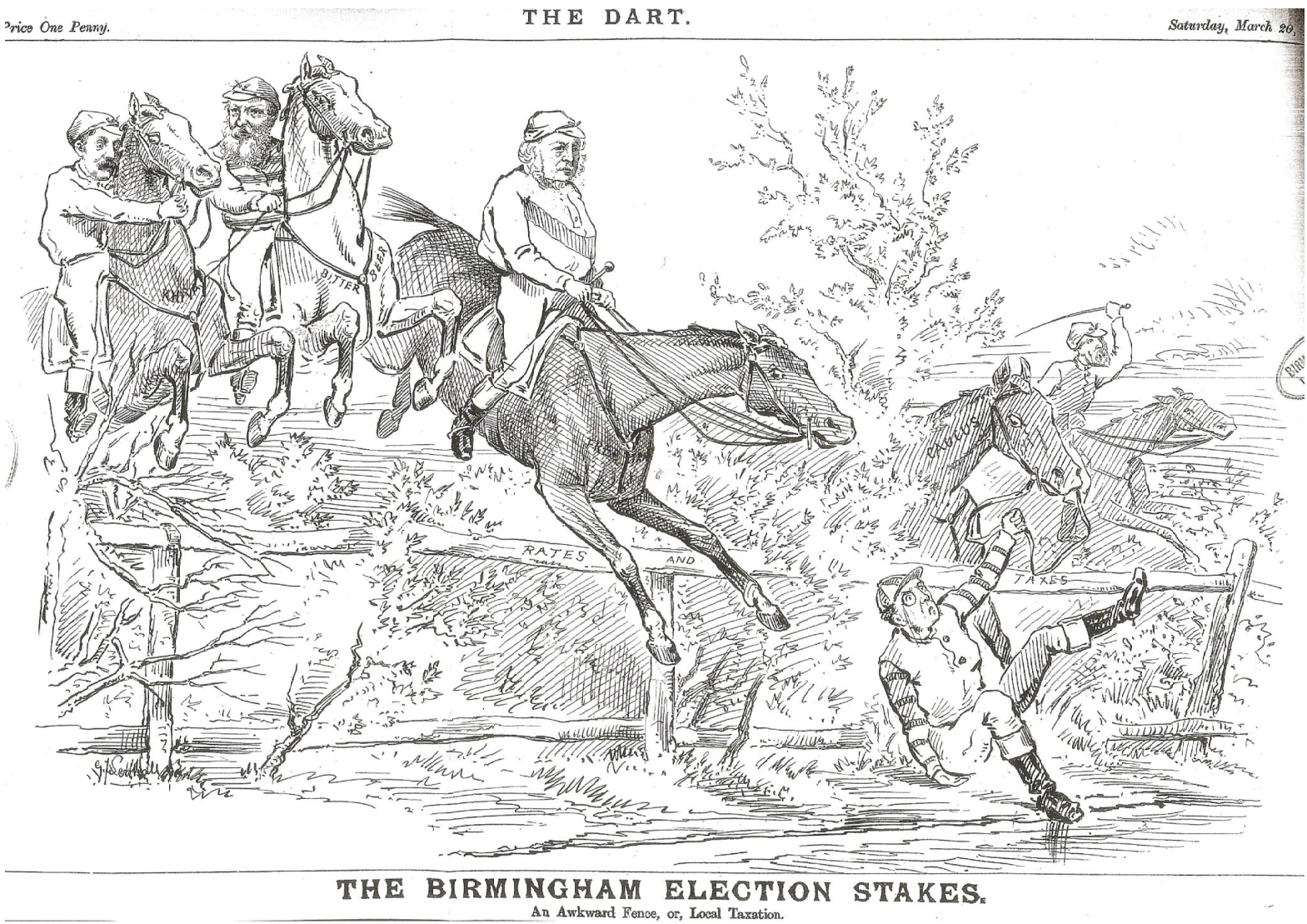
protectionism. What is clear is that *The Dart* was continuing, at this stage, to portray Bright in a positive light.

Fig.2



This cartoon (fig.3) from 1880 exhibits a similar sentiment.³⁰

Fig.3



It shows the competing candidates for the upcoming election, with Joseph Chamberlain 'unhorsed' by taxes, Bright leading the field, his main opponent Burnaby and Bright's fellow Liberal Muntz following behind him and Calthorpe, the second Tory candidate, as an outsider. The accompanying text states that, 'Bright, the favourite, leads and stands to come in "first past the post" as he will always do as long as he chooses to represent Birmingham'.³¹ This appears to clearly indicate the persistence of Bright's popularity, particularly as *The Dart* was the voice of opposition to the Liberals. But what is perhaps more interesting is that by showing Chamberlain's and the Caucus's demise it clearly separated them from Bright. It seems that although the Caucus was working to re-elect Bright, his opposition were going to some length to ensure that he was seen as distinct and separate from them. Notably, in subsequent cartoons referring specifically to the Caucus, Bright is similarly conspicuous by his absence, despite the inclusion of his fellow Liberal MPs.³² This suggests that perhaps, particularly given Bright's reputation as a maverick, the Liberal Conservative backers of *The Dart* may have been seeking his support, rather than simply acknowledging his popularity. Indeed, Bright's potential in this context had been obvious to the Conservatives for some time as *The Gazette* wrote six years earlier that 'it is notorious that the right hon. gentleman is not at one with his colleagues upon certain matters'.³³ Certainly at the time of the 1880 election, the Liberals were divided over issues of fair trade and protection, as well as those of Empire and foreign policy, and the Tories were only too happy to ferment further disagreement by supporting one group over the other.³⁴ These were issues on which Bright traditionally stood apart from many of his Liberal colleagues and so it seems quite feasible that this, rather than genuine admiration, was the motive for *The Dart's*

³¹ *The Dart*, 20 March 1880, p.9

³² In the cartoons of *The Dart*, depicting members of the 'Caucus', 5 and 12 June 1880, Bright is conspicuous by his absence.

³³ *Birmingham Gazette*, 28 January 1874, p.4

³⁴ Ward, *City-State*, p.83

unusually positive portrayal of an erstwhile opponent. Undoubtedly, if the Liberal Conservatives could have gained Bright's support against the Caucus, or at least used him to fragment it, it would have been a significant achievement for them.

Indeed, if we scratch the surface, there are further subtle suggestions that such effusion is only on sufferance, such as the intimation that Bright's popularity at this time may have been attributable to his reputation and afforded as a mark of respect for his earlier achievements, rather than his more recent or current performance. Notably, at his Birmingham speech of 20 January 1880, it was remarked by *The Dart* that 'Mr Bright's eloquence was expended among the glories of the past'.³⁵ It further suggested that it would have been more preferable to hear him 'strike out a new line in the political controversies of the day'.³⁶ Even the pro-Liberal *Gridiron*, whilst predictably effusive, tellingly failed to focus on the content of Bright's speech, which did indeed contain little of his immediate intentions.³⁷ Was he already appearing tired and outmoded, even to his supporters? Perhaps as the Caucus's influence began to decline in the face of increased Conservative support, long-time doubters of Bright felt more able to voice their concerns. Interestingly, in this context, the aforementioned accompanying text could be read as suggesting that if Bright had stood in any town other than Birmingham, he would not have been elected. Could this be a subtle reference to the role played by the Caucus in maintaining his position? Certainly in the cartoon below (fig.4), depicting the Liberal electoral success of 1880, it is notable that the British lions of the electorate are portrayed as still blinded by the 'vote as you're told' dogma of the Caucus.³⁸

³⁵ *The Dart*, 24 January 1880, p.9

³⁶ *The Dart*, 24 January 1880, p.14

³⁷ Smith, *Life and Speeches: Vol. II*, p.346; *The Gridiron*, 31 January 1880, p.4

³⁸ *The Dart*, 10 April 1880

Price One Penny.

THE DART.

Saturday, April 10.

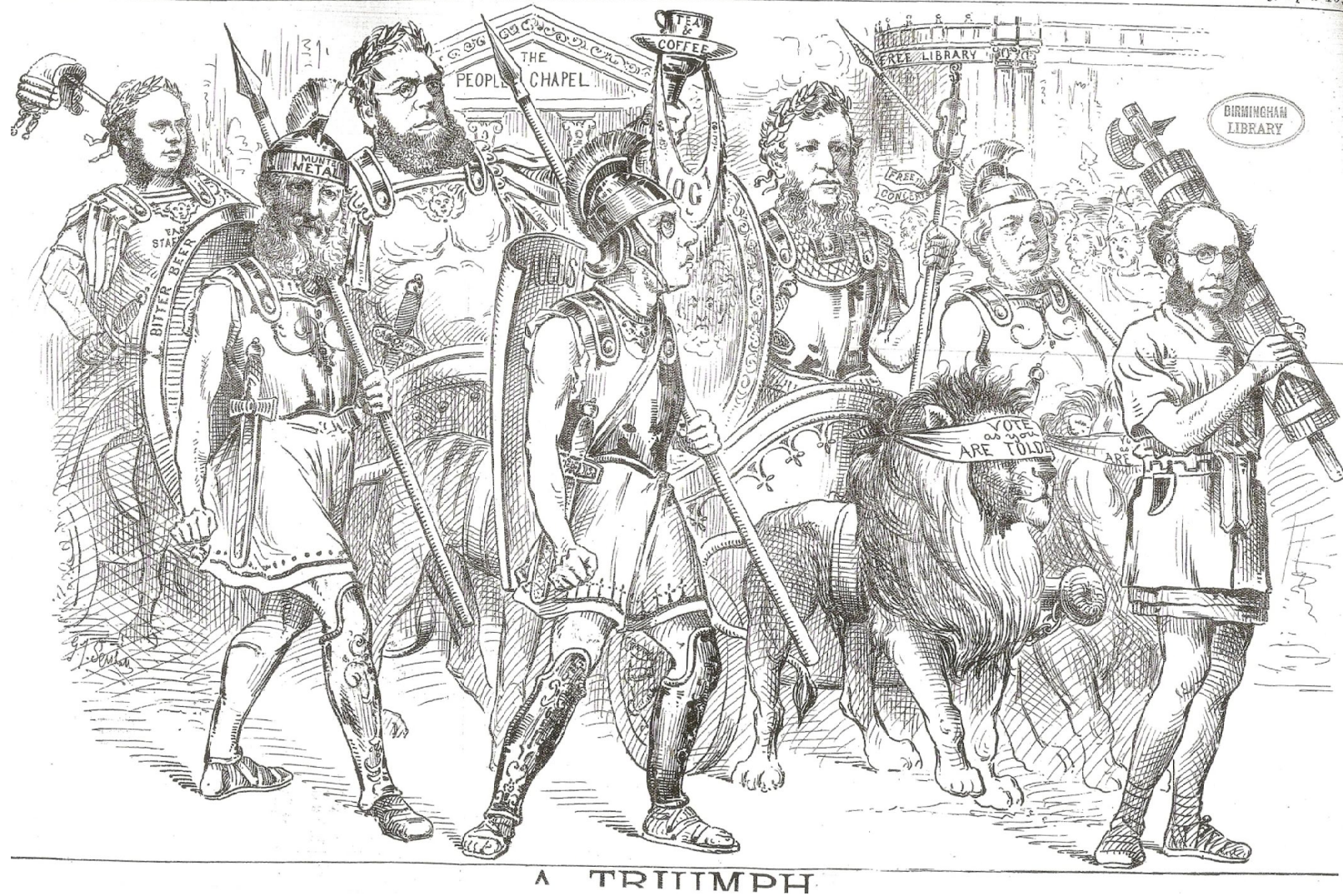


Fig.4

Bright For Birmingham? A Reassessment of the Popularity of John Bright as M.P. for Birmingham, 1857-1889

Throughout the 1880s, however, the issue of Bright's decreasing popularity in certain quarters becomes less of a question and more of a certainty. His decisive split with Gladstone and the Liberals in 1882, over his objection to the bombardment of Alexandria, led to him becoming increasingly isolated from his erstwhile colleagues. Indeed, in his own diary he noted on 11 July 1882 that 'there seems not a single friend of mine with whom I can consult'.³⁹ The cartoon below (fig.5), published less than two weeks later, shows the main body of the Liberals continuing to work together, possibly to 'orchestrate' events, whilst Bright alone removed himself from the group, refusing to be 'conducted' by Gladstone.⁴⁰ The use of the word 'won't' in the caption serves to suggest that this was all Bright's doing and the use of the word 'play' indicates a degree of immaturity – though whether on the part of Bright or of his colleagues is unclear. It is notable, however, that he is carrying the largest instrument, which could be a reference to the fact that he was perceived as still capable of making a 'big noise' in political circles, even on his own.

Bright's increasingly poor health and resultant absence from his constituency, at which his attendance had never been more than occasional even when in the best of health, also attracted increasing criticism. The 1887 cartoon below (fig.6) clearly displays Bright perceived as a 'dumb dog', rendered silent by his absence in the face of Gladstone and Parnell's increasingly convivial relationship.⁴¹ It suggests that the frustration felt by his absenteeism was growing and, in particular, highlights the concern that, in his absence, Gladstone and Parnell were clearly pushing ahead with their Irish Home Rule agenda without Bright to oppose them. That it had been more than a year since Bright visited or even wrote to his constituents is reinforced by the caption. Whilst this was not the first time that this happened, that it is so plainly

³⁹ Walling, *Diaries of Bright*, p.486

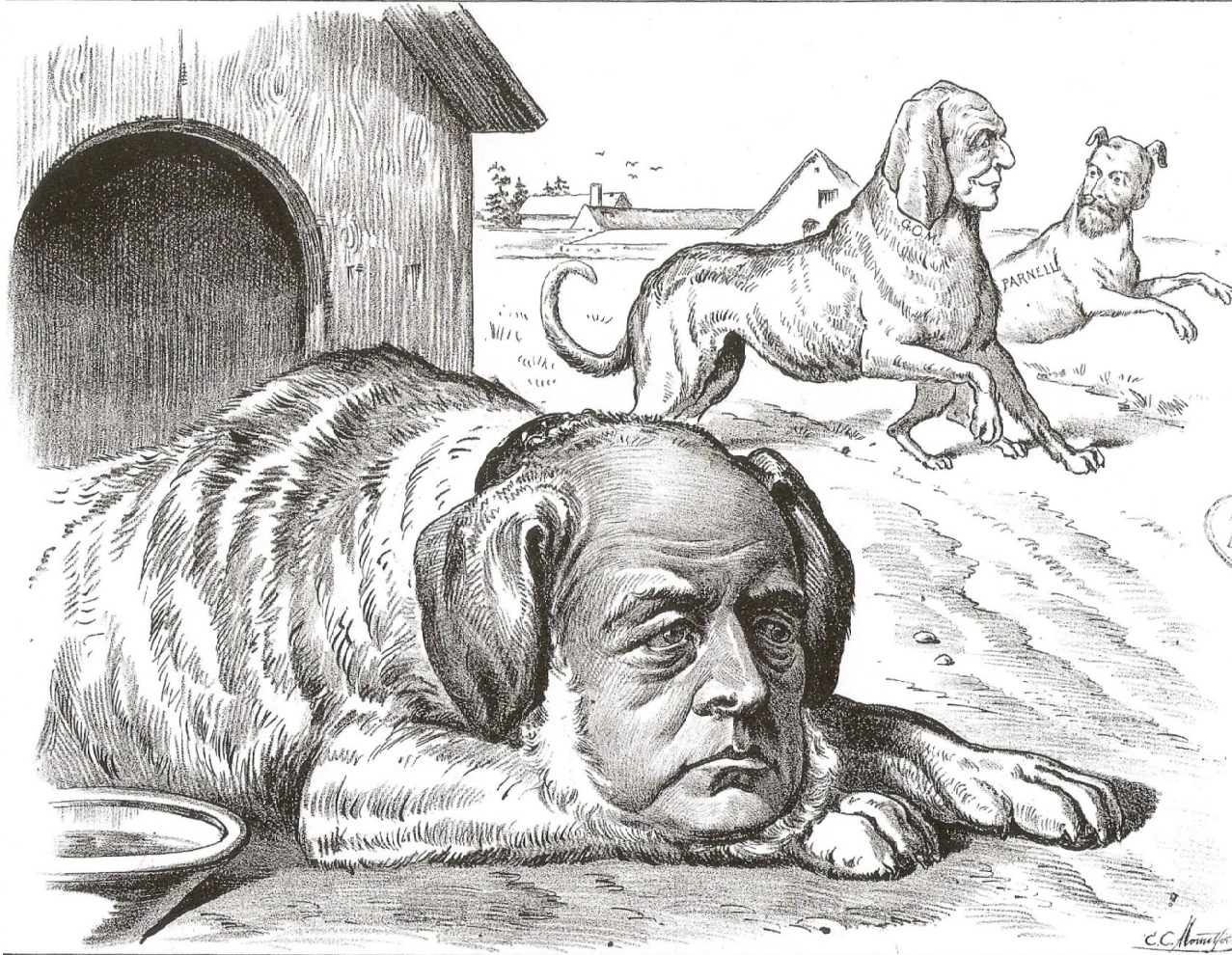
⁴⁰ *The Dart*, 21 July 1882

⁴¹ *The Dart*, 25 February 1887

Fig.5



JOHNNY WON'T PLAY.
(THE NEW *DEPARTURE* SYMPHONY.)



E. C. OSBORNE & SON, LITHO, NEW ST. BIRMINGHAM

A DUMB DOG.

(Mr. BRIGHT has not addressed his constituents for more than twelve months.)

Fig.6

Bright For Birmingham? A Reassessment of the Popularity of John Bright as M.P. for Birmingham, 1857-1889

presented as a criticism is indicative of the increasing frustration directed at Bright. Such feelings were summed up succinctly by one of his constituents who wrote that 'I have several burning grievances which I would like my M.P. to redress, or try to. But with J. Bright, M.P., I despair of it quite! Oh dear!'⁴² Tellingly, in contrast to the 1880 election, there was no longer any effort made to separate Bright from the rest of his Liberal contemporaries. Perhaps he was no longer seen as influential enough to be useful. Indeed, another constituent wrote of all the Birmingham MPs, including Bright, that 'we never hear a word from them or of them'.⁴³

Furthermore, it seems Bright's dogged championing of his personal principles in the light of increasing evidence to the contrary was beginning to be viewed by more than just his political opponents as old-fashioned and inflexible, rather than courageous and honest as it had been previously. This 1887 cartoon (fig.7) shows Bright and John Jaffrey, long-time member of the Liberal elite and owner of the *Birmingham Daily Post*, clearly upset by a fair trade demonstration lead by the ex-Liberal Henry Hawkes.⁴⁴ The portrayal of Bright as the proverbial old maid, swooning in response to the events outside, clearly implies that he was perceived by some as being unable to accept new ideas. It is also telling that he is being held by Jaffrey which, along with the notice on the wall, suggests that he was now viewed as being seriously reliant on *The Birmingham Daily Post* for support. Most notably, the references to the protectionist fair trade agenda succeeding Bright's own free trade principles, and his dramatic response, highlight the concern that he was allowing nostalgic personal principle to interfere with much-needed pragmatism. Despite the fact that free trade was no longer viable, it was feared that Bright was unable to relinquish his belief in

⁴² *The Dart*, 11 March 1887, p9

⁴³ *The Dart*, 11 March 1887, p9

⁴⁴ *The Dart*, 2 December 1887

the system that he had championed for so long. Vince's claim that old age, weariness and prejudice were catching up with Bright seems justified.⁴⁵

Fig.7



E.C. OSBORNE & SON, LITHO, NEW ST. BIRM.

TOO MUCH FOR THE JOHNNIES.

⁴⁵ Vince, *John Bright*, p.168

That *The Dart* was one-sided is a certainty. However, with a readership of 20,000 in a major urban centre, it is undeniably a significant indicator of public opinion. The intention of this chapter was not to evaluate the *fairness* of any significant criticisms of Bright, but only to identify if there were any as they would serve to illustrate groups or individuals with whom he was not popular. It would seem then, that contrary to the assertions of the majority of his biographers and his common portrayal, claims that Bright's enormous popularity continued until the end of his career seem, at best, exaggerated. That is not to say that he was unpopular – indeed, far from it – but it certainly indicates that his popularity as an MP for Birmingham was not as universal as has previously been held and, more significantly, appears to have actually been diminishing towards the end of his career. Whether or not Bright may have been for Birmingham, it is clear that Birmingham as a whole was, particularly in the later years of his career, undecided as to whether it was for Bright. Thus, the myth of Bright appears to have most definitely been a truism. However, it seems increasingly obvious that its effects were felt – and perhaps used – within Bright's lifetime as well as beyond it. The next chapter will consider one instance when this may have been the case.

3: The Popular Celebrity?

We have seen how Bright's biographers have been responsible for the propagation of an exaggeration of Bright's popularity, and how, even in the most recent works of Ausubel and Robbins, writing almost a century after Robertson, this myth endures. However, it may be that it was not only after his death that the myth of Bright was to obscure the reality, but during his lifetime as well. As far back as his first election to Birmingham in August 1857, we have seen that the desire of some for the prestige afforded by Bright's name and reputation outstripped the desire for Bright himself. Ward writes that 'his continuing popularity was movingly demonstrated in 1883 when, on the occasion of his silver jubilee as their MP, the people of Birmingham turned out in impressive numbers to attend rallies, meetings, dinners and presentations which occupied a full week'.¹ However, to what extent was this a genuine expression of the feelings engendered by Bright? This final chapter will begin by considering how the celebrations were reported at the time, and the extent to which this has influenced their subsequent portrayal. It will then seek to identify any evidence that disagrees with this general consensus and attempt to assess its validity in offering an alternative interpretation of events. Finally it will reflect on any ulterior motives for the staging of the celebrations beyond those specified by posterity, and the likelihood that Bright's reputation was deliberately made use of.

During the week commencing Monday 11 June 1883, Birmingham hosted a town-wide event promoted as a celebration of John Bright and his achievements. Bright himself arrived by train on Monday, and was met by enthusiastic crowds, including the Mayor and his friend George Dixon, who presented him with a commemorative

¹ Ward, *City-State*, p.71

gold medal. There then followed a huge and extensive procession through the town for almost four hours, where spectators lined the streets and filled the windows, cheering, shouting and waving. Bright himself wrote that 'the whole affair [was] extraordinary from [the] multitude of people, and from their excitement and enthusiasm'.² After a relatively restful Tuesday, residing at Dixon's home, he was the guest of honour at a huge meeting at Bingley Hall on Wednesday evening, with an attendance in excess of 20,000, where over 150 addresses were presented and several speeches given, of which Bright's was the highlight. On Thursday, a banquet in his honour was held at the Town Hall, where he spoke again. Friday saw him attend the unveiling of the statue of his late friend and Liberal stalwart John Skinner Wright, and this was followed by another speech, this time at the Town Hall. He eventually departed Birmingham by train on Saturday, but not before breakfasting with the committee of the Junior Liberal Club.

The celebrations were reported with significant enthusiasm and great effusion locally. *The Birmingham Post* wrote at length throughout the week-long event, noting in particular that it was 'one of the most remarkable tributes of popular approval ever bestowed on a public man'.³ Similarly, *The Owl* remarked that it would be 'one of the greatest events in Birmingham's history'.⁴ *The Town Crier* also stated that 'such bannering, bunting, brass-banding, and bellowing are things to be seen once in a lifetime'.⁵ Of course, such an overwhelmingly positive response could arguably be attributed to the Liberal dominance of the Birmingham press, were it not for the fact that similar reports were forthcoming nationally and, in some instances, even internationally. *The Northern Echo* wrote that 'Birmingham will more than divide with Westminster the attention of the country... [as it does] itself the honour of paying

² Walling, *Diaries*, p.501

³ Ward, *City-State*, p.71

⁴ *The Owl*, 8 June 1883, p.3

⁵ *The Town Crier*, July 1883

respect to John Bright.⁶ *The Glasgow Herald* concurred that the celebration 'gave [the] promise of being one of the most memorable in the history of living statesmen'.⁷ Even the Dublin-based *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, perhaps surprisingly in light of Bright's objection to Irish Home Rule, wrote of his popularity and the magnitude of the gratitude felt towards him by the population of Birmingham.⁸ Commemorative pamphlets and special issues of newspapers were printed, both locally and nationally, celebratory books were produced and even several thousand medals were minted in commemoration of the event. Thus, that the event itself received a largely positive response, both from within Birmingham and beyond, cannot be denied.

These same sentiments have been reiterated, albeit often extremely briefly, in successive biographies and studies of Bright but, crucially, they attribute the popularity of the event to the popularity of the man with little or no reference to any supporting evidence. Robertson, for example, implies that the celebrations were the free choice of the constituents of Birmingham and had been planned for some time, yet fails to identify exactly which constituents or to reflect on the motives for their decision.⁹ Similarly, Vince enthusiastically describes the spectacle as 'unsurpassed' except by royalty, and claims it was a clear demonstration of Bright's popularity yet, despite admitting how unusual such a display was, he fails to reflect on what this could imply.¹⁰ Trevelyan only mentions the celebrations briefly, as a reference to how it made Bright feel about the worth of his later career.¹¹ Ausubel is even briefer in his acknowledgement of the celebrations, as is Robbins, but again both agree that

⁶ *The Northern Echo*, 11 June 1883, p.3

⁷ *The Glasgow Herald*, 11 June 1883, p.7

⁸ *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 12 June 1883, p.7

⁹ Robertson, *Life and Times*, p.544

¹⁰ Vince, *John Bright*, p.183

¹¹ Trevelyan, *John Bright*, p.437

they reflect Bright's popularity whilst failing to justify this.¹² Even Ward, writing most recently, describes the celebrations as a moving demonstration of his continued popularity and, like his predecessors, does not expand on this.¹³ Of course, as the celebrations were purported to be in Bright's honour, it is understandable that his popularity has been assumed and, if we are to measure popularity by the volume of crowds, effusive newspaper reports and hagiographic biographies then that was certainly true.

However, the popularity of an event does not necessarily imply the popularity of the man himself. Only Joyce, perhaps unsurprisingly given his post-modernist credentials, questions the general consensus, proposing that 'the day was essentially a Liberal one, not a Birmingham one' and most certainly not predominantly a Bright one, with a distinct militaristic undertone of Liberal control.¹⁴ This is perhaps excessive, particularly as he only refers to it briefly and his arguments are restricted by his consideration of a very limited number of sources. Nevertheless, his suggestion serves to draw attention to the fact that the overwhelming popularity of the event is taken as an assumption of the overwhelming popularity of the man, and there are indications that this may not have been justified.

Perhaps predictably, it was the pro-Conservative *Birmingham Gazette* which was the loudest voice of opposition to the otherwise generally enthusiastic response to Bright's celebrations. Admittedly, some other publications were more moderate or even cautious in their praise, such as *The Dart* which was notably guarded in its welcoming of Bright.¹⁵ The *Gazette*, however, showed no such reservations and, during the five days of Bright's visit, dedicated significant space to decrying the man

¹² Ausubel, *Victorian Reformer*, p.219; and Robbins, *John Bright*, p.250, respectively.

¹³ Ward, *City-State*, p.71

¹⁴ Joyce, *Democratic Subjects*, p.137

¹⁵ *The Dart*, 8 June 1883, p.9

and his principles, discrediting his past achievements or attempting to attribute them to the Tories, whilst at the same time ascribing his popularity to the machinations of the Caucus rather than to the man himself.¹⁶ Crucially, however, from amongst this tirade, some particularly illuminating conclusions can be drawn about the true nature of Bright's popularity and that of the celebrations themselves.

Firstly, the vitriol of the *Gazette's* attack on Bright and the Liberals is in itself evidence that the celebrations were viewed, at least by the Conservatives and their supporters, as being more about party politics than the celebration of a popular man. Indeed, so strongly was this felt that Francis Lowe, a local solicitor and one of the few Birmingham Conservative councillors, strongly opposed the Town Council's proposal to present an address to Bright, but was frustrated in this by the overwhelming dominance of the Liberals.¹⁷ This is particularly significant, however, given that support for the Conservatives in Birmingham at this time was growing, as evidenced by the small but increasingly significant victories scored by them in recent School Board and Town Council elections.¹⁸ Clearly a significant minority of the Birmingham population were suspicious of the motives behind the celebrations and we must wonder at the extent to which they saw them, as the *Gazette* wrote, as a 'genuine caucus method of gaining a political demonstration'.¹⁹

In light of this, it is difficult to see how acclaim for Bright could have been as universal as has been suggested, particularly amongst that same significant minority. Such a sentiment is clearly illustrated by the *Gazette*, which wrote that 'recently there has been a marked growth of Conservative feeling among the ratepayers. It is a fact that a section of our population, rapidly increasing in numbers and influence, regard Mr.

¹⁶ *Birmingham Gazette*, 8 June 1883 to 15 June 1883

¹⁷ *Birmingham Gazette*, 6 June 1883, p.4

¹⁸ Leighton, 'Municipal Progress', p.130

¹⁹ *Birmingham Gazette*, 8 June 1883, p.4

Bright's past political activity as mischievous'.²⁰ Indeed, they decried the decision as unrepresentative, and complained specifically that 'what is most objectionable in... [the Council's behaviour] is its hypocritical assumption that Birmingham is unanimous in paying homage to Mr. Bright'.²¹ The choice of Bright himself as a cause for the celebrations was, therefore, most certainly not as popular as the Liberals claimed and, significantly, the most vehement objections came predominantly from a section of the electorate that was growing in size and strength.

Additionally, the expenditure of the Town Council on this event was criticised as unrepresentative and 'reckless'.²² Certainly, it was clearly felt by some that the Liberals were abusing their position to promote 'one of their own', placing their own political agenda ahead of the needs of the town itself. Again, the *Gazette* complained accordingly that 'it cannot be maintained that it is for the interests of the town that party spirit should thus fling aside all trammels'.²³ These objections, then, all serve to indicate that, despite the Council's claims to the contrary, the celebrations were not the overwhelmingly popular choice that they were declared to be.

Perhaps most interesting, however, is the direct accusation that the celebration was less about any genuine display of affection for Bright and more about raising the political profile of the Birmingham Liberals themselves. 'The real reason for the whole celebration is a desire to whip up the waning popularity of Messrs. Bright and Chamberlain', wrote the *Gazette*, maintaining that the continual reliance of the Liberals on their 'vote as you're told' system, established almost two decades earlier by the Birmingham Liberal Association, was a clear indication that their popularity

²⁰ *Birmingham Gazette*, 6 June 1883, p.4

²¹ *Birmingham Gazette*, 6 June 1883, p.4

²² *Birmingham Gazette*, 6 June 1883, p.4

²³ *Birmingham Gazette*, 6 June 1883, p.4

was in decline.²⁴ Of course, this argument, like much of the Tory rhetoric espoused by the *Gazette* during that week, could easily be taken as political indignation on behalf of a frustrated and relatively impotent Conservative minority in Birmingham, were it not for some very interesting facts.

Most tellingly, Bright did not want a celebration in his honour, and had made this quite clear to his contemporaries. In response to the event being proposed by his Liberal colleagues, he wrote in his diary two months prior to the event that he had endeavoured to make this obvious and felt that they were 'making their kindness oppressive to me'.²⁵ Indeed, the Conservatives would doubtless have been gratified to know that he too considered the expense of the event alarming.²⁶ Furthermore, at the event's conclusion, he notably described himself as 'relieved'.²⁷ At this stage in his career, he clearly had little interest in improving his popularity and, arguably, never had. What had started as a relationship of convenience between Bright and Birmingham had seemingly become, for Bright at least, one of inconvenience. As early as December 1882 he had reflected that his future in Birmingham was uncertain.²⁸ Even days before his visit, uncharacteristically, he was still struggling to find material for his speech.²⁹ It is clear, then, that he had little interest in participating in the celebrations or even in their undertaking and thus we must wonder at the motives of the Birmingham Liberals in continuing with such an enterprise in the knowledge that its chief beneficiary was so reluctant.

Furthermore, Bright was most certainly not the shining star of radical Liberalism that he had once been portrayed as, either nationally or locally where, as we have seen in

²⁴ *Birmingham Gazette*, 11 June 1883, p.4

²⁵ Walling, *Diaries*, p.497

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.501

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.502

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.492

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.500

the previous chapter, his popularity had waned significantly. *The Dart* noted ironically that, of the differences between their memory of Bright and his appearance in a portrait commissioned for the event, 'we see him so seldom, that perhaps we have not noticed the change'.³⁰ The *Gazette* was, characteristically, far more scathing, questioning his commitment and integrity by describing him as 'a man who, being endowed of brilliant gifts and having enjoyed marvellous opportunities, has performed as little of work as possible [and] has neglected the interest of those with whom he assumed to be identified'.³¹ And if decreasing support from his constituents were not enough of a blow to him, his split with Gladstone over the bombardment of Alexandria in July 1882 left him isolated from his colleagues as well. He was most certainly no longer seen as the dynamic and energetic politician of his earlier years, and *The Dart's* description of him as 'a hero who lives mainly in the past' seems sadly fitting.³² In light of this, it is difficult to believe that, even with his enduring reputation, Bright alone could have attracted so large and enthusiastic a response, without a significant level of intervention. This is precisely what was suspected by some who asked, 'can it be... that Mr. Bright's popularity is waning even at Birmingham? It would almost seem so, when the Caucus machinery has to be employed to ensure the success of the demonstration in his honour'.³³ Indeed, the presence of numerous placards, banners and displays proclaiming Bright's triumphs from several decades earlier, before his time as MP for Birmingham and, undoubtedly, even before the births of many of the celebrants themselves, would seem to suggest that Liberal intervention went significantly beyond the purely organisational.³⁴ We must wonder, then, at the extent of Caucus intervention, the

³⁰ *The Dart*, 8 June 1883, p.9

³¹ *Birmingham Gazette*, 14 June 1883, p.4

³² *The Dart*, 8 June 1883, p.4

³³ *Birmingham Gazette*, 8 June 1883, p.4

³⁴ *The Morning Post*, 11 June 1883, p.3

implications to Bright's true popularity at the time of the celebration and, most significantly, the true intentions of the Birmingham Liberals.

Finally, if this was truly a celebration in honour of Bright, as it was claimed to be by its Liberal organisers, it is highly suspect that some of his closest friends and colleagues were conspicuous by their absence. Most notably Gladstone himself, with whom, despite his political and moral disagreements, Bright remained firm friends, was not present.³⁵ Admittedly, Bright had suggested to the organisers, most likely out of politeness, that Gladstone should not be pressured into attending as he had far more important concerns.³⁶ However, it is unlikely that the Liberals should have conceded to that request yet not to his desire to avoid the celebration entirely. It is perhaps more likely that they did not want Gladstone, the 'grand old man' of the Liberals and a commander of significant respect, overshadowing their own performance, particularly given the uneasy relationship between Chamberlain, as the dominant member of the Birmingham Liberal elite, and Gladstone.³⁷ Indeed, it is notable that the presentations to Bright were forthcoming from the Liberal 'great and good' of Birmingham specifically, to the conspicuous exclusion of all others.³⁸ This lends further credence to the notion that the intention of the event was not the celebration of Bright but rather the self-aggrandisement of the Birmingham Liberals.

It seems increasingly likely therefore that, just as the Conservatives had argued, the 1883 celebrations of John Bright's silver jubilee in Birmingham do indeed appear to have been predominantly a political vehicle for the Birmingham Liberals seeking to exploit the potential of Bright's popularity. The political situation at the time would certainly support this argument as, nationally, the Liberal party itself, although in

³⁵ BAH, L78.1BRI/Acc.No. 67328 (John Bright Celebration, Official programme, 1883)

³⁶ Walling, *Diaries*, p.497

³⁷ Ward, *City-State*, p.86

³⁸ BAH, L78.1BRI/Acc.No. 67328 (John Bright Celebration, Official programme, 1883)

power, was 'fractious and unstable', divided over a number of contentious issues, particularly those of 'free' versus 'fair' trade and the question of Irish Home Rule.³⁹ The situation in Birmingham was no different, except that the comfortable control enjoyed by the Caucus, even during the Conservative years of power from 1874 to 1880, was also showing signs of decline. As the Birmingham Conservatives grew in organisation and popularity during the early 1880s, so they gained support which had previously been Liberal.⁴⁰ Similarly, the working class, growing resentful of Caucus dictation, became increasingly unlikely to vote as instructed, instead preferring to put their faith in independent Labourites.⁴¹ The Liberal monopoly, then, was in danger of losing its grip in Birmingham. They needed a rallying point to reaffirm party support and display their power. Bright, or rather the reputation of Bright, was likely to have provided just such an opportunity, particularly in his appeal to the working class. This seems a far more convincing reason for an undertaking of such size and expense than does the celebration of an MP whose best days had arguably passed and whose recent achievements had been limited.

If further proof were needed that the celebrations were really about Liberal Birmingham rather than about Bright, then Joseph Chamberlain's ill-received speech must surely be it. In the midst of the supposed celebrations of Bright's career and achievements, Chamberlain took the opportunity to embark on a political speech to lay out his vision of the Liberal future. It was most definitely not appreciated and he was condemned for attempting to hijack the event and for casting doubt, however unintentionally, on the achievements of Bright.⁴² However, it does serve perfectly to illustrate the motives for the organisation of the celebration. Chamberlain was at the heart of the Caucus and it was evident that the celebrations had been planned

³⁹ Ward, *City-State*, pp.84, 87

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.88

⁴¹ Leighton, 'Municipal Progress', p.130

⁴² Quinault, 'John Bright and Joseph Chamberlain', p.633; Robbins, *John Bright*, p.250

meticulously and well in advance. Chamberlain's speech was, therefore, unlikely to have been a spontaneous occurrence. It was a carefully planned opportunity to promote the Liberals, and a microcosm of the nature of the whole event.

Interestingly, the reaction to Chamberlain's clumsy speech also serves to highlight one further argument for the Birmingham Liberals choosing to deliberately use Bright in this way. Despite Chamberlain's significant and ongoing achievements, he never attained the popularity of Bright.⁴³ He prided himself on being a Birmingham man but was perhaps *too* close to his constituents, enabling them to see his weaknesses as well as his strengths. Bright, on the other hand, made no such pretensions and yet became an almost mythical figure, whose regular absence seems to have allowed his reputation to flourish unencumbered. It is telling that, even in remonstrating him for his absences, *The Dart* acknowledged this, perhaps unintentionally, writing that 'Mr. Bright's visits to Birmingham are, like those of the proverbial angels, short and far between'.⁴⁴ Thus, although Bright's career was clearly in decline, whilst Chamberlain's was continuing to grow in influence, it was Bright's reputation that was seen as the more influential of the two and which would thus be the ideal rallying point for the Birmingham Liberals of the early 1880s.

In conclusion, it is clear that the 1883 Bright celebration was an overwhelmingly popular event. However, posterity has made little or no distinction between the event and the man, thus fostering the mistaken belief that the celebrations were a clear indication of Bright's popularity. There is clear evidence however, that the event was less about Bright and more about a political promotion by the Birmingham Liberals whereby the memory of Bright's past achievements was carefully employed with the aim of generating or consolidating local Liberal support at a time when their twenty

⁴³ Quinault, 'John Bright and Joseph Chamberlain', p.645

⁴⁴ *The Dart*, 24 January 1880, p.9

year domination of Birmingham politics was beginning to look increasingly vulnerable. In light of this, it is at best unrealistic to refer to the celebrations themselves as evidence of the popularity of Bright himself. In fact, Bright appears to have been an aside to the whole event, where the *reputation* of Bright from nearly three decades earlier took centre-stage to perform under the direction of the Liberal Caucus. Once again, Bright was overshadowed by his own reputation.

Conclusion

During his lifetime, and ever since, John Bright has been commonly portrayed as a Victorian hero, venerated by the majority and deeply respected, even by his opponents. That such a portrayal exists is not in dispute, but the extent of its accuracy is. Ausubel writes that 'a great deal of nonsense was written about John Bright during his lifetime... [and that] the flow of nonsense has continued since his death' and from our findings here, it would seem that he is correct.¹ Certainly, this study has shown conclusively for the first time that Bright's popularity was far from the overwhelming phenomenon that it has been commonly accepted as being. A careful examination of his 1857 and 1859 elections has revealed that he was not the overwhelmingly popular choice of MP for Birmingham. Furthermore, a detailed study of the portrayal of his later career in the illustrated press has clearly shown that his popularity during his time as an MP for Birmingham continued to be less than all-encompassing and, in his later years, was in fact diminishing. Nevertheless, successive biographers have neglected to acknowledge these facts, and this study reveals the crucial reason why this has been the case: a recurring failure to separate the man from the 'myth'.

It is a curious distinction but one that must be made. John Bright was undoubtedly popular. There is much evidence to suggest that he was at the very least an honest, principled and capable politician. Yet he was still just a man, with a man's limitations, despite what his biographers would have us believe. Indeed, he was clearly not above sacrificing his principles in the face of pragmatism, as was shown by his concession with regard to a military response to the India Mutiny in 1857. Nor was he

¹ Ausubel, *Victorian Reformer*, p.vii

beyond belligerence, as his dogged championing of the benefits of free trade in the 1880s, even in the face of increasing evidence to the contrary, clearly displayed. In light of this, it is difficult to see how he could have attained such enormous acclaim purely of his own accord.

The 'myth' of John Bright, however, suffered no such handicap of reality. As news of Bright's achievements spread in his early years, so association with his name became politically desirable, particularly after he was credited with the successful repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846. Crucially, this groundbreaking study has revealed that, even as early as 1857, it was his *reputation*, rather than the man himself, that was most desirable to the Liberals of Birmingham and that twenty-five years after his arrival in Birmingham this was still the case. Even as late as 1886, both Gladstone and Chamberlain courted Bright's support over the question of Irish Home Rule, likely not for what little individual vigour could be brought by a tired, ailing and increasingly stubborn politician, but more probably for the kudos that his reputation would bring to their cause.

The potential use of Bright's reputation as a political tool was recognised by the mid-Victorian Liberal elite of Birmingham and they were quick to exploit it. Over time, particularly with him being mostly unavailable to contradict it through word or deed, Bright the man became almost superfluous to Bright the reputation. It is therefore easy to understand how his biographers, ignorant of the facts unearthed here for the first time, have failed to make any distinction between the two. What the Victorians, and those subsequently, have hailed as *overwhelmingly* popular was the myth of Bright and not the man.

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Abbreviations

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BMI Birmingham and Midland Institute

NBNO Nineteenth Century British Library Newspapers Online, available at <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>

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